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ABSTRACT

Given the increase in statistical information on the well-being of America's children during the past decade, Child Trends sought to find out how well public perception matches official statistics on the characteristics and well being of America's children. Three public opinion polls were designed to ascertain the public's understanding of the current circumstances of and trends in the well-being of American children. Responses were then compared to the best available data to assess the accuracy of the public's perceptions. The poll results suggest that large segments of the public do not hold accurate perceptions, and that the public is unaware of major trends in child well-being. Overall, the findings indicate that most Americans think that children and youth are worse off than they actually are, and are either unaware of or are discounting progress made during the last decade. In fact, most Americans think that things are getting worse for children and youth, even when notable improvements have occurred. For example, despite considerable publicity about the decline in the welfare rolls, 74 percent of the public believes that the number of children on welfare has increased or stayed the same since the passage of the 1996 federal welfare law. Similarly, although the teen crime rate is at its lowest level in more than 25 years, 91 percent of the public believes that the percentage of teens who commit violent crime has increased or stayed the same over the past 10 years. The polls also document that a large segment of Americans lack an awareness of many basic demographic and economic characteristics of America's children, although they tend to be more informed in these areas than about trends in and levels of child well-being. It was noted that a misinformed public may make it more difficult to develop and support effective policies and programs that promote child well-being. (Author/HTH)

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Lina Guzman, Laura Lippman, Kristin Anderson Moore, and William O'Hare

Child Trends, Inc.

July 2003

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Child TRENDS
RESEARCH BRIEF

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How Children Are Doing: The Mismatch between Public Perception and Statistical Reality

By Lina Guzman, Laura Lippman, Kristin Anderson Moore, and William O'Hare* July 2003

Overview *Over the last decade, statistical information that sheds light on the well-being of America's children and youth has proliferated. Government agencies and private organizations have released this information on a regular basis to the general public through reports and Web sites. Prominent examples of reports include* America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being[1] *and* Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth,[2] *both issued by the federal government, and the* KIDS COUNT Data Books *developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.*[3] *Examples of online data sites include those developed by the federal government,*[4] *KIDS COUNT, and the newer Child Trends Databank.*[5]

Given this increase of information, we sought to find out how well public perception matches official statistics on the characteristics and well-being of America's children. Child Trends designed three public opinion polls to ascertain the public's understanding of the current circumstances of and trends in the well-being of American children. (See box on page 2 for details about the polls.) We then compared the poll responses to the best available data to assess the accuracy of the public's perceptions. This Research Brief *presents the findings of our study.*

The poll results suggest that large segments of the public do not hold accurate perceptions, and that the public is unaware of major trends in child well-being. Overall, we found that most Americans think that children and youth are worse off than they actually are, and are either unaware of or are discounting progress made during the last decade. In fact, most Americans think that things are getting worse for children and youth, even when notable improvements have occurred. For example, despite considerable publicity about the decline in the welfare rolls, 74 percent of the public believes that the number of children on welfare has increased or stayed the same since the passage of the 1996 federal welfare law. Similarly, although the teen crime rate is at its lowest level in more than 25 years,[6] *91 percent of the public believes that the percentage of teens who commit violent crimes has increased or stayed the same over the past ten years. The polls also document that a large segment of Americans lack an awareness of many basic demographic and economic characteristics of America's children, although they tend to be more informed in these areas than about trends and levels of child well-being.*

These findings have important implications for the larger society. Perceptions influence public policy, as well as public and private investments in children. If the public is misinformed and if, in fact, the public looks at the condition of America's children largely through a negative lens, it may be more difficult to develop and support effective policies and programs that promote child well-being.

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*William O'Hare is the KIDS COUNT Coordinator at the Annie E. Casey Foundation

About the Polls

The study's authors developed a series of questions that ask respondents to provide their best estimates of children's demographic and social characteristics and current levels of, and recent trends in, child well-being. The topics selected were ones that had implications for public policy. Child Trends then contracted with Princeton Data Source, an affiliate of Princeton Research Survey Associates, to conduct telephone interviews with nationally representative samples of adults living in the continental United States. About 1,000 adults were interviewed in each poll – the first in May 2002, the second in October of that year, and the third between March and April of 2003.[7] The margin of sampling error for the three polls is plus or minus three percentage points.

To reduce respondent burden and interview length, response categories were limited to three options and most response options were qualified with the word "about." The three response options included the correct estimate or the closest number to it ending in 5 or 0 – based on the most current data – and, in most cases, an underestimate and an overestimate option. The second type of question format used in the polls asked respondents to report whether they thought a certain indicator of child well-being had increased, decreased, or remained the same in recent years. Since only three response options were provided, respondents might have simply guessed the correct answer. Consequently, the real level of misunderstanding may be higher than the data presented here reveal.

Current Circumstances Of Children's Lives

The polls asked about children's demographic characteristics, including the size and racial/ethnic makeup of the child population, the proportion of children with foreign-born parents, and the proportion living with grandparents. In addition, the polls asked respondents to assess the extent of child poverty, births outside of marriage, single-parent families, and health insurance coverage among children. These questions asked respondents to provide their best estimates of current statistics that described these circumstances of children's lives.

For the five questions asked on demographic characteristics, on average, only 42 percent of the respondents answered correctly. For the eight questions on the current levels of children's circumstances, on average, 37 percent responded correctly.

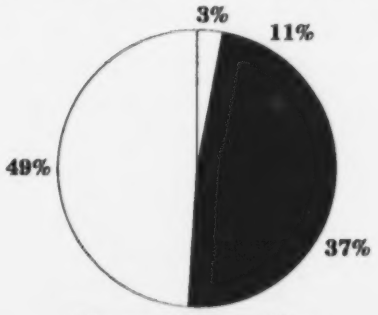
Here are examples of the public's perception on children's current circumstances:

- **Percentage of children living in poverty:** Almost half (49 percent) of adults believe that about 30 percent of children are living in poverty. This is about twice the actual child poverty rate of 16 percent (see Figure 1).[8] In contrast, only slightly more than one-third (37 percent) of adults estimate the child poverty rate correctly. This result is consistent both with the general finding of our polls and with other research suggesting that the public tends to overestimate the extent of problems among children.

FIGURE 1

As far as you know, what percent of children are living in poverty? Is it:

■ About 5 percent □ About 30 percent
■ **About 15 percent*** □ Don't know/refused



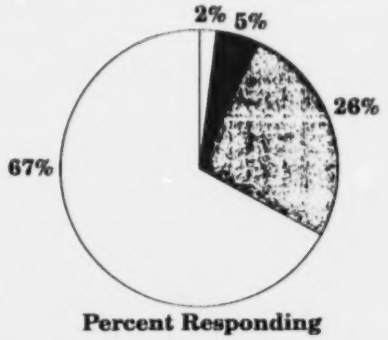
Percent Responding

*Indicates correct response

FIGURE 2

What percent of all children, do you think, have no health insurance? Is it:

■ **About 10 percent*** □ About 30 percent
□ About 20 percent □ Don't know/refused



Percent Responding

*Indicates correct response

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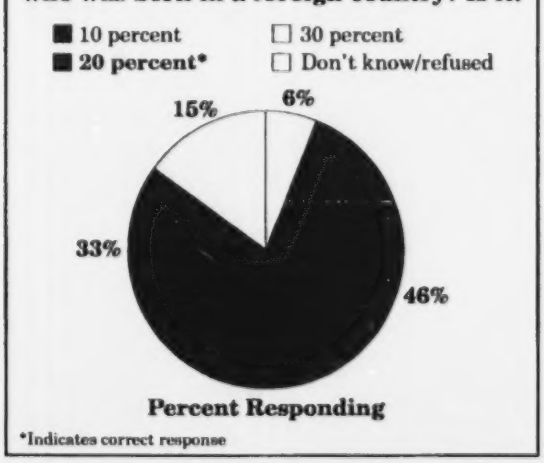
- **Percentage of children who have no health insurance:** The vast majority of adults (93 percent) believe that the percentage of children who lack health insurance is 20 or 30 percent, when the actual percentage of children who are uninsured is 12 percent (see Figure 2).[9] These findings, again, are in keeping with the tendency of the public to think that children are in worse circumstances than they are.
- **Percentage of children with a parent who was born in a foreign country:** Almost half of adults incorrectly estimate the proportion of children in the U.S. with a foreign-born parent at 10 percent; and only one-third of adults know that 20 percent of children in the U.S. have a foreign-born parent (see Figure 3).[10] This finding suggests that the public does not fully grasp the magnitude of the nation's growing immigrant population.

FIGURE 3

As far as you know, what percent of children in the U.S. have a parent who was born in a foreign country? Is it:



*Indicates correct response

In contrast to the examples given above, the public's perceptions about many basic demographic characteristics of children are aligned more closely with the official statistics. For example, about 45 percent of adults believe correctly that children make up about 25 percent of the U.S. population[11] and about 55 percent of adults recognize correctly that Latino children represent the fastest growing minority group within the child population.[12]

While most people overestimate the percentage of all children in poverty, public perceptions of relative poverty rates *across* the three major racial and ethnic groups stack up well with official statistics. Half of adults are aware that only about 10 percent of white children are living in poverty, in contrast to 30 percent of African-American children, and more than 40 percent of adults are aware that about 30 percent of Latino children are living in poverty.[13]

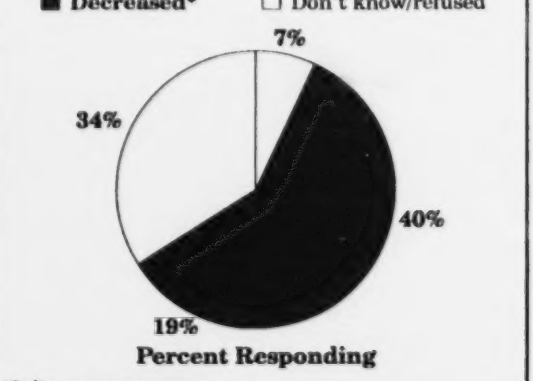
Trends In Child Well-Being

Other questions in the polls asked respondents to provide their best assessment of recent trends in the well-being of children and youth, that is, how indicators of child-well being have changed over time. Poll results suggest that the public's awareness of *trends* in child well-being is even poorer than their understanding of children's *current circumstances*. On average, only 28 percent of the public responded correctly to these trend questions. Here are some examples:

- **Changes in the number of children receiving welfare:** Forty percent of adults believe that the number of children on welfare has increased and another 34 percent believe that it has remained the same since the passage of the historic welfare reform law in 1996 (see Figure 4). In fact, the number of children receiving public assistance has been halved – from approximately 8.7 million in 1996 to approximately 4.4 million in 2000.[14] Yet less than one in five adults (19 percent) is aware of this remarkable decline.

FIGURE 4

Since welfare reform was passed in 1996, do you think the number of children receiving welfare has:



*Indicates correct response

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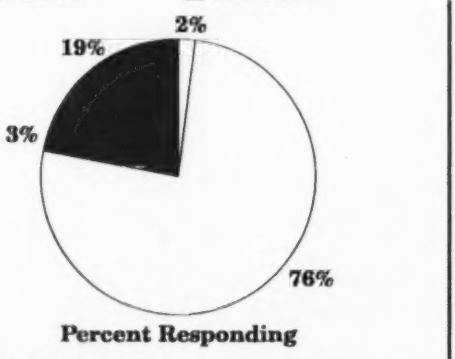
- **Changes in the percentage of children living in single-parent families:** More than three-fourths of adults believe that the percentage of children living in single-parent families increased over the last five years, whereas that percentage has remained about the same (see Figure 5).[15] The majority of the public, once again, appears to think that challenging circumstances are getting worse for children.

FIGURE 5

During the last five years, do you think the percent of children living in single-parent families has:



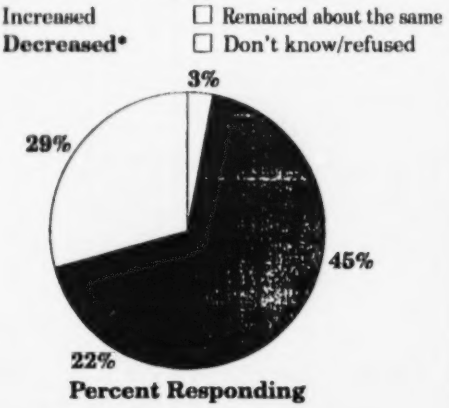
Percent Responding

*Indicates correct response

- **Changes in the teen birth rate:** Almost half of adults (45 percent) believe that the teen birth rate has increased over the past five years, and another 29 percent believe that it has remained about the same (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6

During the last five years, do you think the teenage birth rate has:



Percent Responding

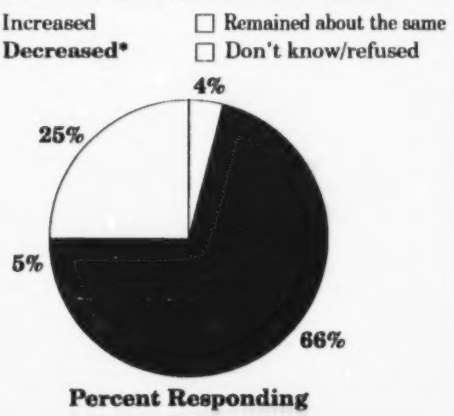
*Indicates correct response

Yet the U.S. teen birth rate decreased by 16 percent between 1996 and 2001.[16]

- **Changes in the level of juvenile crime:** Sixty-six percent of adults believe that the percentage of teens who commit violent crimes has increased over the past ten years, and another 25 percent believe that it has remained about the same, while only five percent believe that it has decreased (see Figure 7). In fact, government statistics show that the violent crime rate among teens has reached its lowest recorded level in more than 25 years; between 1990 and 2000, the juvenile crime rate declined by 56 percent.[17] This misperception about the juvenile crime rate echoes findings in the research literature showing that many adults hold negative views of teens.[18]

FIGURE 7

Over the past ten years, do you think the percentage of teens who commit violent crimes has:



Percent Responding

*Indicates correct response

Consistent with the pattern of overemphasizing problems and missing improvements in child well-being, the one question about trends that the majority of the public got "right" dealt with changes in the percentage of school-aged children who are overweight. Seventy-six percent of adults correctly responded that the percentage of school-aged children who are overweight increased over the past ten years, compared with 16 percent who believed that it remained about the same, and three percent who believed that it had decreased. In the period between 1988-1994, 11 percent of six- to 19-years-olds were overweight; that percentage increased to 15 percent in 1999-2000.[19]

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Variations In Perceptions

Analyses of the survey results also provided insights into how people's perceptions of child well-being are formed and shaped. These analyses confirm the common-sense observation that one's perception of children's current circumstances and trends in child well-being are related, in large part, to one's background, environment, and experience. Factors that help shape these perceptions include:

- **Marital Status:** Married adults are slightly more informed, in general, about children's characteristics and trends in child well-being than non-married adults. However, in one instance, married adults are less well-informed than their non-married counterparts. Married adults are more likely than single adults to underestimate the proportion of children born to unmarried women, suggesting that married couples are less informed about families whose structures do not mirror their own.
- **Area of Residence:** People living in non-urban areas tend to underestimate the proportion of children who have foreign-born parents to a greater extent than those living in urban areas, where recent waves of Latino immigrants are more likely to be concentrated.[20]
- **Educational Attainment:** People with higher levels of education are more likely to be better informed than those with lower levels of education. However, when it comes to estimating the proportion of children who are born to unmarried mothers, those without a college degree are more likely to estimate correctly than those with a degree. This pattern may reflect the fact that relatively few of the people in the social network of most college graduates have a birth outside of marriage.[21]
- **Gender:** Typically, when men and women have misperceptions about children, women tend to overestimate and men to underestimate problematic circumstances. For example, more women than men overestimate the percentage of children living in single-parent families and in poverty, a consequence, perhaps, of women's greater likelihood of experiencing both single-parenthood and poverty.[22]

Surprisingly, parents are no more informed about how well America's children are doing than adults with no children. Also, no clear patterns emerged in the degree of accuracy of perceptions based on respondent's race and ethnicity.

Influences On Perceptions

Respondents were asked to report the extent to which the following sources played a role in shaping their perceptions about children and teens: the news media; the government; universities and research organizations; groups that work to advocate for children's issues; religious or community leaders; and their own personal experiences. Responses to this question reinforce the above analyses showing that people's individual experiences have the most important influence on their perceptions of child well-being.

More than half (56 percent) of respondents reported that their perceptions of children and teens were shaped *a lot* by their own personal experiences, and another 30 percent reported that they are influenced *a little* by them. Thus, 86 percent of respondents report being influenced by their own experiences.

Other sources of information influenced their perceptions as well. Just over 60 percent of respondents reported that their views on children and teens were shaped *a lot* or *a little* by what they learn from government, advocacy organizations and universities and research organizations, while 68 percent reported that their views were influenced to some degree by religious and community leaders.

In addition, three-quarters of respondents reported that their perceptions were shaped *a little* or *a lot* by the news media. Yet a recent media analysis of news articles from five major newspapers by the Annie E. Casey Foundation reveals that topics related to the status and well-being of children are rarely covered. More specifically, the analysis found that over a 13-month period, a total of 494 articles on five of the topics covered in these polls (i.e., welfare reform; immigrant children and families; single-parent families; teen mothers; and births outside of marriage) appeared across the five newspapers.[23] In comparison, during the same time frame, the five papers carried more than 6,700 articles on the stock market.

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The analysis also found that when newspapers *did* carry articles on child topics, relatively few articles (only 39 percent) contained any statistical data. The media, instead, often featured dramatic stories on children in dire circumstances. Further, when articles *did* cite statistics on levels or trends of child well-being, these statistics were typically presented without any historical or geographic context, so that the reader could not interpret whether the statistic was relatively good or bad, or represented an improvement or a decline.

Implications For Public Policy

The results of the polls described in this *Research Brief* are troubling. These findings indicate that a lot of the good news that has accumulated about children and youth is not filtering into the public consciousness – the facts that child poverty has declined or that fewer teens are having babies, for example. Such gaps in the public's knowledge underscore the importance of ongoing efforts to provide basic and accurate information about America's children. Perhaps just as importantly, these gaps point to the need to develop more creative strategies for disseminating this information. For example, religious and community leaders appear to have a lot of influence on shaping public perceptions. Since these leaders might be good candidates for conveying information on child well-being to their congregations and constituents, perhaps data producers should be more conscientious about making sure members of these groups get their data. This might be subsumed under broader attempts to increase the statistical literacy of the country.[24]

The second reason for concern stems from what the polls reveal about the public's overemphasis on the negative aspects of children's lives. While many American children and youth still face daunting challenges, the poll results suggest that the public is unaware of recent progress. Because they are unaware of the successes that have occurred, they may be less willing to continue investing in the programs or supporting the policies that have helped to bring about these positive changes. Also, as long as public perceptions dwell on the negative, policy and program development will tend to focus on addressing negative outcomes, rather than on investing in efforts that can boost positive outcomes, thus missing out on a promising approach to improving the well-being of children and youth.

When perceptions about child well-being are inaccurate, as revealed in these polling data, thoughtful and effective policies are less likely to emerge. The ultimate losers if this occurs, of course, are *America's children.*

This *Research Brief* draws heavily from two reports prepared by Lina Guzman, Laura Lippman, and Kristin Anderson Moore for the Annie E. Casey Foundation – "What Does the Public Know about Children's Social and Demographic Characteristics" (December 2002) and "What Does the Public Know about Children's Economic and Demographic Characteristics" (February 2003). The brief also draws heavily from a paper on "Public Perception of Children's Well-Being" prepared by Lina Guzman, Laura Lippman, and Kristin Anderson Moore of Child Trends and William O'Hare of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Public Opinion Research in Nashville, Tennessee, in May 2003, and is now available at www.childtrends.org/PDF/publicperpaper.pdf. Finally, the discussion in this brief pertaining to the influence of the media on perceptions of child well-being is drawn from a paper by William O'Hare, "Perceptions and Misperceptions of America's Children: The Role of the Print Media," available at www.aecf.org/kidscount/ohare_paper_on_media_6_26_03_final.pdf. The authors thank Jason Fields of the United States Census Bureau for his review of this brief. In addition, Child Trends gratefully acknowledges the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its support of our research on public perceptions of child well-being as well as for its general support of our communications activities. We also are indebted to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for ongoing support of our *Research Brief* series and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for their support of our communications efforts.

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Endnotes

[1]Available at http://childstats.gov/americaschildren/

[2]Available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/00trends

[3]Available at http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/

[4]For example, http://www.childstats.gov and http://www.cenus.gov

[5]Available at http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org

[6]Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2002). *America's children: Key national indicators of well-being, 2002.* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

[7]In the first poll, as many as seven call attempts were made to contact all sampled telephone numbers. In the two subsequent polls, ten such attempts were made. Care was taken to produce samples that closely mirror the general population with respect to age and gender. The overall response rates – which estimate the fraction of all eligible respondents that were interviewed – were 28 percent for the first poll, 24 percent for the second poll, and 36 percent for the much shorter third poll. While these responses are relatively low, the available research suggests that they are comparable to rates obtained in polls of similar sizes and methodology, as well as by other survey organizations. See, for example, Council for Marketing and Opinion Research. (2002). *CMOR respondent cooperation audit: Preliminary roles.* Retrieved on June 10, 2002, from http://www.cmor.org/refusal/refusal299.htm.

[8]Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2002). Op Cit.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (1997). *Characteristics and financial circumstances of AFDC recipients FY 1996, Aid to Families with Dependent Children.* Washington, DC: Author. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2002). *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program: Fourth annual report to Congress.* Washington, DC: Author. Please note that the 2000 report refers to the number of children on TANF during fiscal year 2000.

[15]Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2002). Op Cit.

[16]Romano Papillo, A., Franzetta, K., Manlove, J., Moore, K.A., Terry-Humen, E. & Ryan, S. (2002). *Facts at a glance.* Washington, DC: Child Trends. Since 1991, the teen birth rate has declined by 24 percent.

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[22]Fields, J., & Casper, L. M., (2000). *America's families and living arrangements. Current Population Reports, Series P20-537.* Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. US Census Bureau. (2002). *Table 1. Age, sex, household relationship, race and Hispanic origin – poverty status of people by selected characteristics in 2001.* Retrieved June 18, 2003, from http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032002/pov/new01_001.htm

[23]The newspapers were the *Washington Post, New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* and the *Chicago Tribune.*

[24]Wallman, K. (1993). Enhancing statistical literacy: Enriching our society. *Journal of American Statistical Association, 88,* 1-8.

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